

Washington, D.C. 20505

14 November 1980

ALERT MEMORANDUM

MEMORANDUM FOR: National Security Council

SUBJECT: Iran-Iraq and Danger of a Wider War

Recent attacks by Iranian aircraft on Kuwaiti border installations raise the possibility that Tehran is now prepared to widen the war in order to stop Arab aid to Iraq. I believe the greatest danger--should Iran continue this course of action--is the possibility that Kuwaiti or other Arab oil facilities will become targets for Iranian attacks.

STANSFIELD TURNER

THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

National Intelligence Officers

14 November 1980

ALERT MEMORANDUM*

IRAN-IRAQ: Danger of a Wider War

The Iranian airstrikes near Kuwaiti border installations on 12 November and possibly 5 November have increased the danger of a wider war in the Persian Gulf. While it is not certain that these strikes were intended actually to hit targets within Kuwait, their purpose was clearly to intimidate the Kuwaitis. Tehran may now be willing to use selective military action against Kuwait and possibly other gulf states to discourage them from aiding Baghdad.

The airstrikes apparently were intended to discourage Kuwait from continuing its current transshipment of Iraqi goods. Tehran has frequently warned the Arabs that support for Iraq will lead to Iranian reprisals. The Iranian Ambassador in Kuwait has regularly informed his government of the flow of supplies to Iraq and has repeatedly called for airstrikes against highways and bridges in Kuwait to halt it. On 11 November he characterized such strikes as "a necessary action from the political standpoint" that would have "an effect on the whole region." Recently, moreover, Iraqi intelligence has been spreading rumors that Kuwaiti aircraft have attacked Khark Island--in an apparent effort to enhance at least the appearance of Arab support for Baghdad. Once it became clear that Iraq would not achieve a quick victory, the Kuwaitis and other gulf countries began trying to play down their support for Iraq, but both Iraqi pressure and Arab nationalist sentiment compel them to continue providing substantial aid to Baghdad.

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If Tehran decides to widen the war by escalating its attacks on Kuwait or striking other gulf states, the United States could become more directly involved in the conflict. US allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia, would very likely request additional security assistance from the United States. [REDACTED]

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There is also a danger that US forces in the area could be attacked--either deliberately or in error--by the Iranians. Tehran has already accused the United States of supplying intelligence collected by the AWACS aircraft to Iraq. Additionally, Iranian officials in the gulf have reported that the US naval facility in Bahrain is aiding Baghdad. Tehran also believes that the United States has concluded a secret agreement with the United Arab Emirates requiring American assistance in the event of an Iranian attack. [REDACTED]

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If the gulf Arabs ignore Tehran's warnings, Iran could launch further strikes, perhaps against oil installations. The Iranian Air Force retains a capability to do this all along the gulf littoral. Iran's more aggressive military attacks on Iraqi oil installations during the past week have already made the risk of another explosion in world oil prices much greater. Given the indefinite suspension of exports from both Iran and Iraq, the market has no further room to absorb even small additional interruption of supplies from the other gulf countries. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets are concerned that a wider war would lead to closer US cooperation with the area's conservative Arab states and an expanded US military presence. The Soviets probably would therefore give additional support to efforts already under way to end the conflict. Moscow would also likely renew its proposal for joint discussions on the security of international maritime and oil traffic. [REDACTED]

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Execution of Operations

Many of the Army's failures apparently are caused by poorly conceived and clumsily executed tactics. At the same time, some of the setbacks can be attributed to the nature of modern guerrilla warfare. Any conventional army, regardless of its training and weaponry, has difficulty gaining and holding the initiative against a resourceful, foreign-supported insurgent force. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted]

[redacted]

Morale and Discipline

In part because of the problems already noted, the government cannot prevent deterioration of military discipline and morale. Soldiers in the field have experienced the effects of poor leadership, inadequate supplies, confused combat operations, and unnecessary casualties. More basic problems also have kept morale low and the desertion rate high. Many regular army soldiers are reluctant to be involved in a war against fellow Iranians and apparently are not convinced of the merits of the government's cause. (In contrast, the Revolutionary Guards fervently believe that the Kurds are counterrevolutionaries who must be crushed.) [redacted] 25X1

[redacted]

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The military's performance against the insurgents suggests that Iran would have great difficulty organizing and implementing a complex plan of multiservice operations. Army counterinsurgency tactics have been erratic and mostly reactive. A stronger enemy presumably would exploit this weakness by striking first and at several points simultaneously. The Iranian command would probably order activation of an established defensive plan. After implementing such an operation, Iranian field commanders probably would be inflexible, fearful of making an error in judgment.

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In engaging a foreign enemy, the armed forces initially would be more united, more motivated, and less likely to dwell on interservice distrust than during counterinsurgency operations. This expected initial period of patriotic fervor probably would not sustain the military, however, in the face of the tactical setbacks that almost certainly would develop.

Iranian forces would probably perform best in a static battle in which they could use their firepower and predetermined battle plans to their best advantage while minimizing the need for complex multiple-unit coordination. A short war—one that would not critically strain the ponderous supply system—would also be to Iran's advantage.

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Iran's recent combat experience provides the military leaders with useful information about areas of needed improvement. If Tehran were able to take advantage of this experience and make the needed changes, a much stronger, more proficient force would develop. But the armed forces are still adrift, beset by doubts about their own mission and capabilities. Only after the central government is united enough to provide confident leadership will the prospects for essential changes significantly improve.

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*Near East/Africa Branch
Eastern Forces Division
Telephone*

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Implications

The performance of Iran's forces in operations against the Kurds highlights deficiencies which, if not corrected, could be fatal during a major conventional conflict. Government tactical successes against the insurgents, when they have occurred, have resulted largely from overwhelming superiority in firepower and control of the air. In a clash with the conventional forces of almost any potential enemy, however, these advantages would almost certainly be absent, forcing the armed forces to rely more on tactical skills, interservice coordination, and their own determination and discipline. These are the areas where the armed forces demonstrate major weaknesses.